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FM AMEMBASSY PARAMARIBO  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9857  
INFO RUCNCOM/EC CARICOM COLLECTIVE  
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 1511  
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 1644  
RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE 1632  
RUEHAO/AMCONSUL CURACAO 1216

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARAMARIBO 000638

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE  
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WHA/CAR JROSHOLT, INR FOR BOB CARHART, DS/IP/WHA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/05/2017

TAGS: [KCRM](#) [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [PREL](#) [NS](#)

SUBJECT: BOUTERSE'S TRIAL BEGINS WITHOUT HIM; STRIKES  
CONTINUE

REF: A. PARAMARIBO 609

[1](#)B. PARAMARIBO 617

Classified By: PolOff in accordance with E.O. 12958

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The &December Process8 murder trial of Desi Bouterse began anti-climactically on November 30 with Bouterse,s failure to appear. The venue was heavily secured, and as expected Bouterse,s lawyer called for dismissal, claiming the court has no jurisdiction. Outside the venue, attendees speculated that the beginning of the trial will not mean the end of Bouterse,s attempts to force the government to resign. Elsewhere, strikes continued, with more expected. Hence, while the beginning of the trial relieved some tension, the process will be slow and technical, and the strikes, rather than the trial, are probably now the most destabilizing factor in Suriname.  
END SUMMARY

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Bouterse Doesn,t Show  
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[1](#)2. (U) The long awaited and highly anticipated trial of former military strongman Desi Bouterse and 24 others opened November 30. The 25 defendants are on trial for the December 8, 1982 execution of fifteen democratic opponents of the military regime. Amidst a tense atmosphere, a large contingent of journalists (including 87 from the Netherlands), relatives of the 15 men killed, and eleven of the defendants sat waiting for the opening procedures. Tension subsided as it became clear that Bouterse was to make good on intimations he might not attend (ref A). Bouterse, who is the lead defendant, is chairman of Suriname's largest political party, the National Democratic Party (NDP), and a Member of Parliament.

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The Trial: Logistics  
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[1](#)3. (U) The trial is being conducted in a specially designed courtroom located on the compound of a Navy base some 15 miles south of Paramaribo. The Government of Suriname has left little to chance: the navy base and the road leading up to it are heavily guarded by armed officers of the military police. Private vehicles are not allowed near the base, and all visitors are bussed in from a police checkpoint some 600 meters from the courthouse. Ironically, this courtroom is part of a building which served as Bouterse's residence while

he was army commander.

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The Trial: Legal Proceedings  
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14. (U) The Court of Justice established two judges' chambers for this high profile criminal trial. One chamber, consisting of three judges (Chief Judge Valstein-Montnor, with judges Rasoelbaks and Rodrigues), hears the cases brought against the high ranking military officers (such as Bouterse) and the civilians implicated in this case. The second chamber, consisting of one judge (Valstein-Montnor) and two high ranking army officers (Cooper and Amatdasin), hears the cases brought forward against lower ranking army officers.

15. (U) Bouterse's lawyer, Erwin Kanhai, takes many high-profile drug cases and is known in society as the drug lawyer,8 reputed to always manage to get his clients off the hook. In his opening before the court, Kanhai carefully avoiding the word "army commander," and contended that Bouterse was not an army officer but de facto head of state and the legislature in 1982. He argued that this court is therefore not qualified to hear Bouterse's case. The panel of judges will deliberate on this point, and the next session is scheduled for December 17. (NOTE: While Suriname's Constitution stipulates that those who hold political office have to be brought to trial before the High Court, this objection will almost certainly be rejected. END NOTE)

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Strikes Continue Apace  
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PARAMARIBO 00000638 002 OF 002

16. (C) In Paramaribo itself many high schools and most bus routes remained closed as of December 4, the result of strikes which began the week of November 26. Many observers insist the strikes are politically motivated and orchestrated by Bouterse. On December 4 the bus strikers upped the ante, blocking roads in downtown Paramaribo. More strikes are expected: in addition to those forecast by Minister of Justice and Police Chandrikapersad Santokhi (ref B), the head of the customs union says the union will strike December 6, meaning Christmas imports will remain in the ports, threatening sales. Meanwhile, Bouterse is close with De Moederbond,8 an umbrella union whose constituent unions control many sectors. Santokhi told Ambassador Schreiber Hughes (ref B) that he expects all8 Moederbond unions to strike.

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Scuttlebutt  
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17. (C) Waiting for the court proceedings to start on 30 November, many present discussed the current political situation and drew parallels between Bouterse's behavior before he took power in the 1980s and his behavior now. Some said they believe Bouterse will eventually have to surrender to the justice system; many more believe the NDP will continue to stir things up and send the Government home. A great deal also believe Bouterse will attempt another coup. On the other hand, a few people whispered that Bouterse might want to go the same way Hitler did and commit suicide before the trial concludes. From the international community, the only Embassy to join Post (the U.S. Embassy sent two LESSs) at the venue was the Dutch, whose PolOff told EmbOff earlier in the week that while the Dutch might prefer to send no one, for internal political8 reasons, they are required to attend. In the end, the Dutch Ambassador stayed away, sending a political officer.

18. (C) A welcome reception hosted by the new French

Ambassador in his own honor the evening of November 30 drew a surprisingly large number of senior GOS officials closely associated with the trial, including Minister of Defense Ivan Fernald, Minister of Justice and Police Chandrikapersad Santokhi, Attorney General Subhas Punwasi, Defense Ministry Head of Planning and member of the Court Martial Court of Appeals LTC Justus Hew A Kee, Head of the Suriname Defense Forces COL Ernst Mercuur, and Commander of the Military Police LTC Carlos Li Fo Sjoie (in charge of security at the site of the trial). Minister Fernald told Ambassador Schreiber Hughes and the DCM that Suriname, by starting the trial, had proved that it was serious about the December Process. Meanwhile Santokhi, Punwasi, Hew A Kee and others seemed loose, confident, and relaxed as they drank French red wine and exchanged jokes for most of the evening.

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Comment  
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¶9. (C) COMMENT When Bouterse failed to appear, November 30 immediately became anti-climactic, and when no violence occurred elsewhere, a certain relief from tension was soon palpable in Paramaribo. However, Santokhi's warning that the strikes and tensions in Suriname are not just related to the trial but an ongoing, separate effort by the NDP to force the government from power (ref B) are believable; however, just as plausible is the view that unions with long-standing, unresolved grievances are merely taking advantage of a perceived GOS willingness to dialogue in this tense political climate.

¶10. (C) COMMENT CONT'D November 30 seemed a sort of Suriname-specific &millennium bug8: while the gloom and doom widely predicted for did not dawn, nor did a new era suddenly spring up. Surinamers, their government, and Bouterse must still struggle slowly forward with the same troubles as before )temporarily free from the sense of apocalyptic paranoia the country,s hothouse culture of rumor and innuendo so easily generates. END COMMENT  
GENTON